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RUEHLZ RUEHPOD RUEHROV RUEHSR RUEHVK RUEHYG
DE RUEHSI #0296/01 0531239
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
R 221239Z FEB 08
FM AMEMBASSY TBILISI
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 8937
INFO RUEHZN/EUROPEAN POLITICAL COLLECTIVE

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 TBILISI 000296

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E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [ECON](#) [KDEM](#) [GG](#)

SUBJECT: GEORGIA BI-WEEKLY UPDATE FEBRUARY 22

¶1. This cable contains current items of political, economic, and social interest concerning Georgia during the weeks of February 9-22.

Prime Minister Unveils Anti-Poverty Plan

¶2. The Georgian government has presented its long-term plan for realization of President Saakashvili's election program "Georgia without poverty," as well as a 50-day action plan aimed increasing foreign investment, decreasing unemployment, and eliminating poverty. The action plan provides for actions intended to lay a foundation for further economic improvement and making the benefits of economic reform tangible for ordinary citizens. Key components of the plan include: launching a so-called cheap credit scheme that aims at boosting exports; legislative changes to introduce a tax rebate for new enterprises over the next ten years; constitutional guarantees for property rights; increase of the state pension; selling plots of land as part of a "100 new agricultural enterprises" program; and distribution of fuel to farmers for spring agricultural activities. Opposition parties were unimpressed by the government's plan, and the newly created Christian Democratic Movement staged a protest action against it outside the Chancellery.

Parliamentary Stalemate on Election Reforms

¶3. On February 19 Parliament failed to reach a quorum that would have allowed it to approve three constitutional amendments on the agenda. The amendments -- reduction of the threshold for proportional seats in Parliament from 7% to 5%; parliamentary elections in spring; and changing the "winner-takes-all" system for majoritarian seats -- had long been demanded by the opposition. Nevertheless, opposition MPs continued their boycott of Parliament, and enough MPs allied with the ruling National Movement were absent for a variety of reasons that only 140 MPs were registered as present, short of the 157 needed to pass constitutional amendments. With the on-again, off-again negotiations between the government and opposition seemingly deadlocked, each side blamed the other for the lack of a quorum. Speaker Burjanadze postponed discussion of the amendments until next week. While most National Movement and opposition MPs favor the changes, a group of majoritarian MPs, apparently hopeful of retaining their seats in the upcoming election, have argued against replacing the current majoritarian system.

Adjara Passes New Draft Constitution

¶4. On February 20, the Supreme Council of the autonomous region of Adjara approved a new draft of the Adjarian Constitution by a vote of 23 to 1. Proponents of the new draft stressed that the previous constitution has remained unchanged since 1978, and the new version is in full conformity with the Georgian Constitution and is "based on democratic principles." The new draft was not supported by the opposition Republican Party, which said it limits the powers of the regional government and makes it completely accountable to the central government in Tbilisi. The draft will be submitted to Parliament for consideration and approval in a few days.

Controversial Detention Facility to be Demolished

15. In a meeting on February 18, President Saakashvili instructed Justice Minister Gvaramia to start working on the elimination of pre-trial detention facility No. 5 in Ortatchala, central Tbilisi. Saakashvili said "The prison in Ortatchala is absolutely unsuitable for placement of prisoners and does not meet the minimum requirements." Saakashvili told Gvaramia to transfer all inmates from the facility and demolish it within 50 days. The pre-trial detention facility, located in a larger prison complex, currently holds 2,650 inmates and according to the Council of Europe's Committee for the Prevention of Torture (CPT) 2007 report "in pre-trial facility, prison number 5 in Tbilisi, living space per prisoner was frequently below 0.5 square meters." The CPT report also pointed out that the provision of health care to prisoners remained problematic due to the shortage of staff, facilities, and resources.

Georgian Consular Officers Receive TIP Training

16. On February 5-6, IOM facilitated a training course for Georgian consular officers to raise their understanding of trafficking in persons (TIP) and how to assist Georgian victims of trafficking abroad. Georgian anti-trafficking officials provided specific input on issues related to Georgian anti-trafficking legislation and victim assistance. The training was attended by fourteen officials of the Consular Department of the Georgian MFA, including ten newly appointed consuls, who soon will take up consular duties at Georgian embassies around the world. Four current Georgian consuls stationed in Turkey (Ankara and Trabzon), Greece, and Kuwait acted as resource persons and shared their experience with the other participants.

Heavy Snow Causes Natural Disaster

17. Heavy snowfall and strong winds rendered most of western Georgia

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a "natural disaster area" early this week, causing avalanches in mountainous parts of the country and leading to at least one confirmed death. Police closed off all roads connecting western regions to Tbilisi. The Georgian Military Highway, which leads north from the capital, was also closed February 18-20 because of heavy snowfall. Snow has damaged power lines leaving hundreds of households without electricity. On February 20 a tornado hit the port city of Poti, damaging roofs and buildings. A storm in the Black Sea washed ashore a ship carrying fuel oil near the village of Makhinjauri, in Adjara. The government mobilized resources to clear the roads and to deliver necessary services to the isolated regions.

TEFFT